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The Rational Choice Approach to Politics: A Challenge to Democratic Theory

Mark P. Petracca

In just three decades rational choice theory has emerged as one of the most active, influential, and ambitious subfields in the discipline of political science. Rational choice theory contends that political behavior is best explained through the application of its supposedly "value-neutral" assumptions which posit man as a self-interested, purposeful, maximizing being. Through the logic of methodological individualism, assumptions about human nature are treated as empirical discoveries. My central argument is that by assuming that self-interest is an empirically established component of human nature, rational choice theory supports and perpetuates a political life which is antithetical to important tenets of normative democratic theory. Rational choice theory offers an incoherent account of democratic citizenship and produces a political system which shows a constant bias against political change and pursuit of the public interest. This article concludes by discussing the merits of democratic deliberation for achieving these transformative ends.

The rational choice approach to politics assumes that individual behavior is motivated by self-interest, utility maximization, or, more simply put, goal fulfillment.¹ As "positive theory," rational choice is increasingly criticized for its failure to construct a model of political behavior which accounts for the complexities of human nature and various aspects of organized politics. These criticisms suggest that, rational choice omits far too much from the complex scheme of political life to be entirely reliable and useful as either explanatory or predictive theory.² As a consequence, critics urge

I would like to thank Kristen Renwick Monroe for encouraging me to turn my thoughts on this topic into a suitable written presentation and for her many substantive comments on earlier versions of this paper. It was also a pleasure to have the wise counsel of Benjamin I. Page, David Easton, and Gabriel Almond at various stages of this paper as well as the research assistance of Catheryn K. Markline. The comments and suggestions of three anonymous reviewers are also greatly appreciated.

1. For the purposes of this article rational choice includes and refers to those approaches to the study of political life influenced by the economic model of man captured under the various headings of public choice, social choice, and collective choice.

2. Three new edited volumes are particularly rich sources of such omissions and suggested modifications. See Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *The Economic Approach to Politics: A Reexamination of the Theory of Rational Action* (New York: Scott-Foresman/Harper and Row-Collins, 1991); Jane J. Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Karen Schweers Cook and Margaret Levi, eds., *The Limits of Rationality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). The list of omissions is easily expanded by

various additions to and alterations in the rational choice model to better accommodate political reality. Since many critics share many of the primary assumptions of rational choice theory regarding human motivations and the quest for the scientific analysis of politics, they propose modifying and supplementing the rational actor model of political behavior rather than questioning the consequences of this approach for democratic political life.

This article breaks with this line of criticism and examines the consequences of the rational actor model for normative democratic theory. Specifically, I argue that the assumption of the self-interested, maximizing individual is incompatible with the transformation of individual and regime which constitutes the *sine qua non* of many important classical and contemporary normative theories of democracy. As a vehicle to this assessment I evaluate the assumptions upon which the model is constructed, identify the dangers to democratic politics posed by the economic model of man, and offer the alternative of democratic deliberation as an approach better able to facilitate the transformation of individuals into citizens and the creation of the public good than is contemporary rational choice theory.

THE CLAIMS OF RATIONAL CHOICE

In just three decades, rational choice theory has emerged as one of the most active, influential, and ambitious subfields in the discipline of political science. Rational choice theory is variously

considering the rigorous attacks on rational choice theory presented variously by Terence Ball, "The Economic Reconstruction of Democratic Discourse," in *Transforming Political Discourse*, ed. Terence Ball (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); William T. Bluhm, "Liberalism as the Aggregation of Individual Preferences: Problems of Coherence and Rationality in Social Choice," in *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany Press, 1987); Barry Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Choice* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988); Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); C. B. MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); C. B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Plamenatz, *Democracy and Illusion* (London: Longman, 1973); David M. Ricci, *The Tragedy of Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Peter Self, *Political Theories of Modern Government* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985); Herbert Simon, "Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 79 (June 1985): 293-304; and Michael Slote, *Beyond Optimizing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

praised, with significant immodesty, for its contribution to political theory, wide applicability, explanatory power, influence on public policy, and promising future.

Peter C. Ordeshook claims that the well-known books by Downs, Black, Riker, and Buchanan and Tullock constitute nothing less than "the beginning of modern political theory."³ With complete confidence, economist Gary Becker claims that the economic approach "is applicable to *all human behaviour*" [emphasis added].⁴ Richard A. Posner, Becker's former colleague at the University of Chicago and currently a Circuit Judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals, extends the application of rational choice theory not only to the development of the law but to the determination and rendering of justice. Posner argues that the widely accepted assumption that "people are rational maximizers of their satisfactions" means "it is no longer absurd to suggest that justice, privacy, primitive law, and the constitutional regulation of racial discrimination might be illuminated by the economic approach."⁵ In the preface to the award-winning *The Rise and Decline of Nations*, Mancur Olson provides another set of strong claims for the broad applicability and explanatory power of the economic approach.

[We can] extend economic theory in a way that not only explains the "stagflation" and declining growth rates [of recent years] . . . but also provides a partial explanation of a variety of problems usually reserved for other fields—the "ungovernability" of some modern societies, the British class structure and the Indian class system, the

3. See Peter C. Ordeshook, *Game Theory and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. ix; Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957); Duncan Black, *Theory of Committees and Elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); and James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1962). This claim is juxtaposed to the conventional wisdom of political philosophers that "modern political philosophy" or "modern political thought" begins in the 1500s with the writings of Machiavelli. See Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1973), and Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); on the "new political science," see Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). A good summary of the Straussian perspective is provided by Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle, "Epilogue," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 8.

5. Richard A. Posner, *The Economics of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 1 and 3.

exceptionally unequal distribution of power and income in many developing countries, and even the rise of Western Europe from relative backwardness in the early Middle Ages to dominance of the whole world by the late nineteenth century.⁶

Beyond these claims, some proponents argue that rational choice theory has directly influenced the course of American public policy. Nobel Laureate James M. Buchanan concludes that the "rapidly accumulating developments in the theory of public choice . . . have all been influential in modifying the way that modern man views government and political process." "This shift in attitudes toward bureaucracies, politicians, and government," alleges Buchanan, has precipitated "various proposals in the United States, at all levels of government, designed to limit the expansion of governmental power."⁷ Indeed, after reading Buchanan's considerable list of political reforms which "emerge from the whole body of public choice analysis,"⁸ I am left with the impression that public choice theory could well take credit for most of the neoconservative policies encouraged during the Reagan era.⁹

For Robert Abrams, the future of political analysis rests with the future of rational choice theory "which will emerge as the pre-eminent approach to political analysis in the next several decades."¹⁰ Abrams's assessment takes us full circle to Ordeshook's initial claim. For many proponents, rational choice constitute the beginning of political theory; for others, its culmination. Though it is tempting to speculate about the validity of such claims, that is not the primary task before us.

6. Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. ix.

7. James M. Buchanan, "Politics Without Romance: A Study of Positive Public Choice Theory and Its Normative Implications," in *The Theory of Public Choice—II*, ed. James M. Buchanan and Robert D. Tollison (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 20–21.

8. James M. Buchanan, "Constitutional Restrictions on the Power of Government," in Buchanan and Tollison, *Theory of Public Choice—II*, p. 442.

9. For further elaborations on the conservative policy recommendations of the so-called Virginia School of public choice, see William C. Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington: Twenty-five Years of Public Choice and Political Science," *Public Choice* 56 (1988): 101–119.

10. Robert Abrams, *Foundations of Political Analysis: An Introduction to the Theory of Collective Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 1. Cf. Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington," p. 115.

MORE THAN JUST ASSUMPTIONS

It is, however, necessary to inquire about the assumptions advanced by rational choice theory. We know that rational choice theory emerges from classical microeconomics. It is formal, axiomatic, and deductive. As a method of political analysis, then, rational choice operates within the boundaries of two well-known assumptions. The first is methodological individualism and the second is the concept of rationality itself.

Methodological individualism insists that everything about society and social action can be reduced to statements about component individuals.¹¹ As a result, the way to study politics is to analyze the political behavior of individuals. Most rational choice theorists are fairly unapologetic for the pivotal role that individuals play in their deductive reasoning, frequently to the exclusion of other important variables.¹² Early rational choice innovators¹³ as well as subsequent applicators,¹⁴ explicitly identify their work in terms of methodological individualism. However, for most practitioners of the rational choice approach, this assumption is so deeply embedded in what they are doing that it need not be explicitly identified or discussed in their analyses.

The problem with methodological individualism is twofold. It encourages a political science which empirically views individual actions as unconditioned by social structures and other supra-individual entities.¹⁵ Methodological individualism also nurtures the normative belief that politics should attend and respond to the needs, wants, and preferences of individuals. This stands in sharp contrast to the Platonic view that political life is about the pursuit

11. According to Karl R. Popper, "The task of social theory is to construct and to analyze our sociological models carefully in descriptive or nominalist terms, that is to say, in terms of individuals, of their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc. — a postulate which may be called 'methodological individualism'" (*The Poverty of Historicism* [New York: Harper and Row, 1957], p. 157). Popper is probably the best single source on this approach to social theory. However, like so many great innovators he is much less certain about the virtues of deductive reasoning than contemporary theorists who appear quite unfamiliar with the subtle nature of Popper's analysis.

12. See Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Choice*, p. 96.

13. See Buchanan and Tullock, *Calculus of Consent*, p. 1.

14. See Ordeshook, *Game Theory and Political Theory*, p. 1.

15. See Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Choice*, pp. 36–39.

of wisdom, knowledge, virtue, justice and other qualities intrinsic to the "good society."¹⁶

The assumption of rationality is essentially an assumption about human nature, more specifically, it is an assumption about what motivates the individual. As a deductive theory the analyst is able to predict particular actions and consequences as a result of an assumption about the motivational force of human nature. In rational choice theory, the precise qualities of human nature vary somewhat. Definitions range from the crude and unbridled pursuit of material self-interest to utility maximization to purposive behavior. Beginning with Hume, the following examples illustrate the central tendencies of various rational choice assumptions about human nature and individual motivation.¹⁷

David Hume—Political writers have established it as a maxim, that, in contriving any system of government and fixing the several checks and balances of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest. By this interest we must govern him, and by means of it, make him, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice and ambition, cooperate to public good.¹⁸

Adam Smith (1775)—But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. . . . It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we can expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.¹⁹

Anthony Downs (1957)—We assume that every individual, though

16. See Bluhm, "Liberalism as the Aggregation of Individual Preferences"; Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*; Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*; and Allan Bloom, "Political Science and the Undergraduate," in *Teaching Political Science: The Professor and the Polity*, ed. Vernon Van Dyke (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977).

17. These examples are presented to counter the claims of rational choice theorists that the theory has moved away from the economic man model of human nature postulated by micro-economics. These citations evidence the rather consistent attention given to the motive of self-interest throughout the history of rational choice theory.

18. David Hume is quoted in Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 30.

19. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 18.

rational, is also selfish. . . . Throughout our model, we assume that every agent acts in accordance with this view of human nature. Thus, whenever we speak of rational behavior, we always mean rational behavior directed primarily towards selfish ends.²⁰

Anthony Downs (1957)—From the self-interest axiom springs our view of what motivates the political actions of party members. We assume that they act solely in order to attain the income, prestige, and power which comes from being in office.²¹

James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962)—. . . the basis for the theory of collective choice . . . assumes that the individual, as he participates in collective decisions, is guided by the desire to maximize his own utility and that different individuals have different utility functions. . . . We propose to analyze the results of various choice-making rules on the basis of this behavioral assumption, and we do so independently of the moral censure that might or might not be placed on such individual self-seeking action.²²

William H. Riker (1962)—Politically rational man is the man who would rather win than lose, regardless of the particular stakes.²³

Kenneth Arrow (1963)—the condition of rationality [is identified] with maximization of some sort.²⁴

Mancur Olson (1965)—Indeed, unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, *rational self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests.* [Emphasis in original.]²⁵

William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook (1973)—. . . we assume actors in society seek to attain their purposes. Persistence in this search, or “goal-directed behavior” to use the current jargon, is the substance of rationality.²⁶

Morris Fiorina (1984)—Most formal models in political science are examples of rational-choice models, a class of models which dominates economics. Such models reflect a view of man as a purposive

20. Downs, *Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 27.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

22. Buchanan and Tullock, *Calculus of Consent*, pp. 25 and 30.

23. Riker, *Theory of Political Coalitions*, p. 22.

24. Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 3.

25. Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 2.

26. William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 10.

being: individual behavior is seen as an attempt to maximize individually held goals.²⁷

Dennis Mueller (1984)—The basic behavioral postulate of public choice, as for economics, is that man is an egoistic, rational, utility maximizer.²⁸

James Buchanan (1984)—public choice models . . . embody the presumption that persons seek to maximize their own utilities, and that their own narrowly defined economic well-being is an important component of these utilities.²⁹

Steven Brams (1985)—Thus, to be rational is to strive for what one desires—or at least to act as if one were pursuing some end. . . . In short, the rationality assumption is by and large a realistic one.³⁰

Morris Fiorina (1989)—I assume that most people most of the time act in their own self-interest.³¹

The phrases “private interest,” “self-interest,” “utility maximizing,” “selfish ends,” “maximization,” “goal-directed,” “purposive behavior,” and “egoistic” characterize the economic approach to rationality. What does this tell us about human nature? The picture of human nature that emerges from these citations is one of egoistic individuals seeking to maximize their own good or well-being. In the main, proponents of rational choice theory “assume that it is egoistically, individualistically, irrational not to maximize one’s satisfactions and seek one’s own greatest good.”³² Protestations notwithstanding, contemporary rational choice theory is no less wedded to the assumption of self-interest than was David Hume or Adam Smith. While contemporary theorists have lessened the severity of what counts as self-interest (occasionally calling it purposive or goal-directed behavior), self-interest continues to be the

27. Morris P. Fiorina, “Formal Models in Political Science,” in *Theory-Building and Data Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. Herbert Asher, Herbert F. Weisberg, John H. Kessel, and W. Phillips Shively (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 84.

28. Dennis C. Mueller, “Public Choice: A Survey,” in Buchanan and Tolison, *Theory of Public Choice—II*, p. 23.

29. Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance,” p. 13.

30. Steven J. Brams, *Rational Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985), p. 2.

31. Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 37.

32. See Slote, *Beyond Optimizing*, p. 7.

assumption which informs many of the actual rational choice models. The influence of values, ethics, and ideas on individual motivation are alien to rational choice theories of human nature. By this account, public-spirited behavior or behavior motivated by other-regarding motives is not only irrational, but highly unlikely.³³

The self-interest assumption is viewed by some "as simply a rational maximizing assumption" which "does not have a particular substantive content."³⁴ Using the analogy of the blank tile in the game of Scrabble, Gabriel Almond asserts that the rational choice assumption of self-interest can take on the value of any utility imputed to it.³⁵ While an interesting claim, this is largely a mute point because with very few exceptions rational choice theories do not take on just any value. Rather, as operationally defined, the assumption of self-interest is treated narrowly in terms of politically instrumental self-interest; or, worse than this, material self-interest in terms of the maximization of votes, money, or political power. Two of the most celebrated books in American politics of the last two decades—David Mayhew's *Congress: The Electoral Connection* and Morris Fiorina's *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establish-*

33. See Gary R. Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," in *The Power of Public Ideas*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 13–29; Steven Kelman, "Why Public Ideas Matter," in *The Power of Public Ideas*, ed. Robert B. Reich (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 31–53; and Steven Kelman, *Making Public Policy* (NY: Basic Books, 1987).

34. Gabriel A. Almond, "Rational Choice Theory and the Social Sciences," in *A Discipline Divided*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990), p. 135.

35. Buchanan and Tullock (*Calculus of Consent*, p. 3) and Buchanan ("Politics Without Romance," p. 13) claim that their analysis does not depend for its elementary logical validity upon any narrowly hedonistic or self-interest motivation of individuals in their behavior in social-choice processes. However, given their great reliance upon the market oriented model of *homo economicus*, which does rely on the assumption of self-interest, it is difficult to view their work as examples of Almond's "blank tile." A less suspect source who accepts the blank tile thesis is the sociologist Michael Hector who argues that "There is nothing in rational choice that denies that individuals can pursue altruistic or prosocial ends. Indeed, the theory tends to be mute about the genesis of individual ends." See Michael Hector, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 11. While widely conceded that rational choice theory does not have a theory of preference formation, this is different from the claim that rational choice theory is compatible with public spirited or other-regarding motivations by individuals. The possibilities for altruism is treated wisely by Amartya K. Sen, Jon Elster, Christopher Jencks, and Jane J. Mansbridge in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*; and by Monroe et al. in Monroe, *Economic Approaches to Politics*.

ment—showed the convincing influence of self-interest as the primary explanatory variable in studies of the political process. Mayhew conceptualized members of Congress as “single-minded seekers of re-election,” while Fiorina explained that to ensure re-election members of Congress enact new government programs that create bureaucratic nightmares so as to intervene and help constituents with their problems.³⁶ Generally speaking, rational choice theories are at their predictive and explanatory best (though they are often wrong) when they treat rationality in these narrow terms.³⁷

Such assumptions, it is argued, not only produce results which are scientifically elegant and persuasive, but also mirror reality. Gordon Tullock, a leading innovator in the field of rational choice, went so far as to claim that empirical research proved that the average human being is about 95 percent selfish in the narrow sense of the term.³⁸ Convinced that descriptions of politics based solely on self-interest “work,” Tullock observed in 1979 that while “the traditional view of government has always been that it sought something called ‘the public interest,’ . . . with public choice, all of this has changed,” adding sarcastically that “the public interest point of view still informs many statements by public figures and the more old-fashioned students of politics.”³⁹

Additionally, the pursuit of self-interest is not a very compelling explanation for many important aspects of contemporary political behavior. The assumptions of rational choice yield a “notoriously poor explanation of voting behaviour” according to Russell Hardin, while Brian Barry makes a similar point for political participation more generally.⁴⁰ When it comes to political change and public

36. See David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Morris Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone to the Washington Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For a critique of Fiorina that argues for a Congress motivated by public spiritedness, see Kelman, *Making Public Policy*. Fiorina's response to Kelman may be found in Chapter 11 of Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone to the Washington Establishment*, 2nd ed.

37. I thank Benjamin I. Page for bringing this point to my attention.

38. Gordon Tullock, *The Vote Motive* (London: Institute for Economic Affairs, 1976).

39. Gordon Tullock, “Public Choice in Practice,” in *Collective Decision Making: Applications From Public Choice Theory*, ed. Clifford S. Russell (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 31 and 33.

40. See Russell Hardin, *Collective Action* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 11; and Brian Barry, *Sociologists, Economists, and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

policy making, Steven Kelman skillfully shows the explanatory limits of the self-interest model.⁴¹ Self-interest, for example cannot account for the vast increases in spending for the poor in the 1960s and early 1970s; the growth of health, safety, and environmental regulation during the same period; the growth of government in the 1960s and 1970; nor the rollbacks in government programs since the mid-1970s. Likewise, the pattern and political success of industry deregulation in the late 1970s was exactly the opposite of that predicted by rational choice models.⁴²

As an empirical question, how accurate are the assumptions of self-interest and utility maximization? As a possible reaction to the ascendancy of the rational choice approach, there is a growing recognition among social scientists that man is a social being, with "choices . . . not rigidly bound to his preferences only."⁴³ Rational choice's "reductionist individualism," which makes sense of all the exchange or market modes of social coordination, cannot accommodate "the permeable, three-dimensional self of the real world—the self which has been fashioned by constant interaction with other selves, in a structure of common traditions, interlocking histories and shared meanings."⁴⁴

Some eminent rational choice theorists have recognized this,⁴⁵ but far too many practitioners have been less attentive to such alternative motivations.⁴⁶ The most extreme argument in support of the self-interest or maximization assumption is advanced by Buchanan who alleges that the burden of proof in this entire matter

41. This discussion draws heavily on Kelman, "Why Public Ideas Matter"; and Kelman, *Making Public Policy*.

42. See Martha Derthick and Paul L. Quirk, *The Politics of Deregulation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985).

43. Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundation of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 66. Also consider, Brian Barry, *Theories of Justice*, p. 285; and David Marquand, "Preceptoral Politics, Yeoman Democracy and the Enabling State," *Government and Opposition* 23 (Summer 1988): 262–65.

44. Marquand, "Preceptoral Politics," p. 266.

45. See Simon, "Human Nature in Politics," p. 303; Anthony Downs, *The Evolution of Modern Democracy* (Unpublished Manuscript, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1988); and James March and Johan Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *American Political Science Review* 78 (September 1984): 738 and 744.

46. See Brams, *Rational Politics*, p. 2; and Michael Laver, *The Politics of Private Desires: The Guide to the Politics of Rational Choice* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), pp. 1–2.

rests with those who *question* the validity or usefulness of *homo economicus* as an assumption of rational choice theory.⁴⁷ Following Buchanan's argument, rational choice theorists are under no obligation to *prove* that their assumption about individual self-interest is accurate. To the contrary, that obligation rests with its critics and those who advocate a different view of human nature.⁴⁸

Rising to this challenge, a growing body of empirical research in a variety of social science disciplines shows the explanatory limits of the rational choice approach to human nature. The disciplines of economics, cognitive psychology, political psychology, sociology, sociobiology, policy analysis, and even political science⁴⁹ have, in the words of Jane J. Mansbridge, prepared the theoretical and empirical ground for a massive revision of the rational choice paradigm.⁵⁰ In a commentary on the relative explanatory power of self-interest versus that of values and ideas, Gary Orren of Harvard's Kennedy School finds:

47. Buchanan, "Politics Without Romance," pp. 13-14.

48. There are many competitive and supplemental understandings of human nature. For examples, see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Martin Diamond, "Ethics and Politics: The American Way," in *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert H. Horowitz (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1986), pp. 75-108; Graeme Duncan, "Human Nature and Radical Democratic Theory," in *Democratic Theory and Practice*, ed. Graeme Duncan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 187-203; Richard Hofstadter, "The Founding Fathers: An Age of Realism," in Horowitz, *Moral Foundations of the American Republic*, pp. 62-74; Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, and Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. and intro. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

49. In economics, see David Collard, *Altruism and Economy* (Oxford: Martin Robinson, 1978), and Joseph Kalt and Mark A. Zupan, "Capture and Ideology in the Economic Theory of Politics," *American Economic Review* 74 (1984): 279-300; in cognitive psychology, see Daniel Kahneman, Jack L. Knetsch, and Richard Thaler, "Fairness and the Assumptions of Economics," *Journal of Business* 59 (1986): 285-300; in political psychology, see David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk, "Self-Interest in Americans' Public Opinions," in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*, pp. 147-70; and Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); in sociology, see Amitai Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1988); in sociobiology, see Donald Campbell, "Rationality and Utility from the Standpoint of Evolutionary Biology," *Journal of Business* 59 (1986): 355-63 and Christopher Jencks, "Varieties of Altruism," in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*, pp. 54-67; in policy analysis, see Kelman, *Making Public Policy*; Kelman, "Why Public Ideas Matter"; and Reich, *Power of Public Ideas*; and in political science, see essays by Kristen R. Monroe et al., in Monroe, *Economic Approach to Politics*.

50. Jane J. Mansbridge, "Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life," in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*, p. 16.

[T]he single most compelling and counterintuitive discovery of research on political attitudes and behavior over the last thirty years is how weak an influence self-interest actually exerts. Evidence has steadily accumulated that ideas and values are autonomous and do not merely rationalize action in accordance with self-interest. Often values arise quite independently of an individual's life experiences and exert an independent influence on political behavior.⁵¹

Tom Tyler's recently published study of why people obey the law shows that normative values about distributive and procedural justice matter in the motivation of individual behavior. In a study of randomly selected citizens in Chicago, Tyler made this important discovery:

People obey the law because they believe that it is proper to do so, they react to their experiences by evaluating their justice or injustice, and in evaluating the justice of their experiences they consider factors unrelated to outcome, such as whether they have had a chance to state their case and been treated with dignity and respect. On all these levels people's normative attitudes matter, influencing what they think and do.⁵²

These assumptions about human nature are of enormous consequence. The empirical assumptions made by rational choice theory may end up creating a political reality which looks very much like the assumptions themselves. How do I arrive at such a possibility? First, assumptions about human nature shape research strategies or conceptual models. Like all social and political phenomena, rationality is socially constructed and constituted.⁵³ There is no such thing as a rationality that is not the rationality of some tradition or the rationality of some *episteme* of knowledge as Michel Foucault would say.⁵⁴ As a constituted phenomena, how we theorize about rationality will contribute to our cognitive understanding of it.

51. Gary Orren, "Beyond Self-Interest," p. 24. A more extensive treatment is this issue occurs in Sidney Verba and Gary Orren, *Equality in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chap. 11.

52. Tyler, *Why People Obey The Law*, p. 178. See also, Tom R. Tyler, Kenneth A. Rasinski, and Eugene Griffin, "Alternative Images of the Citizen," *American Psychologist* 41 (September, 1986): 970-78.

53. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 123; and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

54. In what Foucault calls the *episteme* are the conditions of knowledge within which organized knowledges are structured. This project is carried out by Foucault primarily in *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970). For Foucault, there is no unequivocal sense which may be accorded to the relation

Second, the research strategies or conceptual models employed by institution-builders influence the construction of particular political and social institutions. The choice of any model is never benign, never neutral, despite frequent claims to the contrary; instead a model influences the collection and presentation of data and the inferences and conclusions that are drawn for public policy. A research strategy determines not only what we see, but how we see it as well as what remains hidden from view.⁵⁵ Graham Allison's classic study of the Cuban missile crisis shows that models not only conceptualize the world in different ways; they conceptualize and represent altogether different worlds or political realities.⁵⁶ "Each conceptual framework consists of a cluster of assumptions and categories that influence what the analyst finds puzzling, how he formulates his question, where he looks for evidence, and what he produces as an answer."⁵⁷

Third, the design of particular institutions will influence political cognition and behavior; more importantly, it encourages some forms of behavior and discourage others. Thus, the assumptions embedded in a conceptual model matter not only to the conduct of research, but, "for the proper design of political institutions."⁵⁸ The Founders of the American Republic, for example, understood the close relationship that exists between assumptions about human nature, the design of political institutions, and anticipated political behavior.⁵⁹ Even as Madison conceded in *Federalist*, No. 10, that no government could eliminate the causes of faction, he defended the new constitutional institutions as the best means to use and repress self-interest to "secure the public good." On the one hand,

of words to things. "Before any definite value can be attached to "words" or "things" it must be recognized that as terms, they will find themselves in a space of knowledge which is always already organized. How words exist, what sort of things there will be, will depend upon that space and its organization. Foucault calls that space an *episteme*, a configuration of relations which functions as the conditions of existence of particular forms of knowledges and sciences" (see Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain, *Michel Foucault* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984], p. 15).

55. See Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Choice*, p. 4; and Simon, "Human Nature in Politics," p. 303.

56. See Lawrence A. Scaff and Helen Ingram, "Politics, Policy, and Public Choice: A Critique and Proposal," *Polity* 19 (Summer 1987): 613-36.

57. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1977), p. 245.

58. Simon, "Human Nature in Politics," p. 303.

59. See Diamond, "Ethics and Politics"; and John P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

"the regulation of these various and interfering interests" could be harnessed through the nation's institutions as a way of involving "the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of government." On the other hand, the system of representation characteristic of a republic would "refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens."⁶⁰

Put simply, assumptions shape models; models influence the design of institutions; and institutions promote certain kinds of behavior. If we design our political institutions based on models of political life embedded with assumptions of self-interest, then such institutions may well promote and nurture self-interested behavior.⁶¹ As John Hallowell aptly put it: "If our conception of man's essential nature and ultimate destiny is false, i.e., unreal, we may be led to seek and apply political solutions to human and social problems that at best are useless and at worst harmful."⁶²

The assumptions of rational choice theory are not without their potential consequence for political life in America. These assumptions are most conducive to the creation of political institutions and political behavior which is narrowly self-regarding, egoistic, optimizing, and shortsighted.⁶³ In the following section we see that this consequence is antithetical to the requirements of many classical and contemporary theories of normative democracy.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

What effect does the particular concept of human nature embedded in the theory of rational choice have on the prospects for

60. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. and intro. Clinton Rossiter (NY: New American Library, 1961), pp. 80, 79, and 82.

61. The political effects of teaching rational choice theory to university students is treated provocatively in Jurg Steiner, "Rational Choice Theories and Politics: A Research Agenda and a Moral Question," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 23 (March 1990): 46-50.

62. John H. Hallowell, *The Moral Foundations of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 89.

63. For social, political, and psychological accounts of this phenomena, see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979); Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984); and Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

democratic governance? Theory shapes the cognition of individuals as it also informs and transforms their practices.⁶⁴ Changes in the concepts which "attend any recognition of the political world"⁶⁵ "are an important part of how new structures of power and influence are established and legitimated."⁶⁶ Belief in the individualist, egoistic, self-regarding consumer — "results in a deeply incoherent account of democratic citizenship"⁶⁷ and produces a political regime which shows "a constant bias against (a) action as against inaction, and (b) public interests as against private and sectional interests."⁶⁸ It is to the consideration of these two important problems for normative democratic theory — the transformation of individual and regime — that we now turn.

THE FIRST TRANSFORMATION: CITIZENSHIP

A polity constituted by self-interested individuals is incompatible with the requirements of democratic citizenship. The qualities of the human nature and individual behavior supported by rational choice theory present severe limits on the transformation of self-regarding individuals into democratic citizens. This transformation is one of the essential defining characteristics of many classical and contemporary normative theories of democracy. Citizenship is more than a status, it also characterizes the individual's view of the political world.

Aristotle's *Politics* is a defense of values which make citizenship central to the good and rational life of man. This conception of citizenship was embodied in the classical republican tradition. The goal of equality among citizens is achieved when "there is reciprocity 'of ruling and being ruled by turn'" and "where reason rather than hierarchical status is the governing principle."⁶⁹ Citizenship

64. Ball, "The Economic Reconstruction of Democratic Discourse," p. 124.

65. James Farr, "Understanding Conceptual Change Politically," in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 30.

66. Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 7.

67. Ball, "The Economic Reconstruction of Democratic Discourse," p. 142.

68. Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 280.

69. Andrew Lockyer, "Aristotle: The Politics," in *A Guide to the Political Classics*, ed. Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens-Soper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 46. Ironically, in appropriating the notion of "rational action" to the instrumental advance of self-interest, rational choice theorists have done a disservice to the rationalist tradition. As Peter Self, *Political Theories of Modern Government*, explains: "This tradition stresses the significant role of reason over the

in the polis was neither an amalgam nor merely an aggregation of individuals. Instead, the polis was an association of households rather than individuals with membership the key precondition of citizenship. Thus, civic life was predicated on the individual's membership in a private association. In this conception of citizenship the individual does not come to public affairs alone, with only his own wants, needs, desires, and preferences. Rather, the individual comes to public life as *part of* a social entity.

The values of the Greek civic ethic are a challenge to modern views of rationality which views the individual as a self-centered, egoistic, infinite consumer. Such an individual was not worthy of admiration and certainly was not an individual capable of democratic governance.

Aristotle's view of political man is not a relic suitable only for quaint recollection and historical reference. The so-called classical (as opposed to ancient) theories of democracy devoted considerable attention to the importance of citizenship. Rousseau thought that freedom and effective political life were both dependent upon the creation of citizens. Maurice Keens-Soper explains Rousseau's position on the creation of citizens outlined in *The Social Contract*:

The body politic is thus a man-made association of intense, austere, and indivisible unity. It is created in a momentary act of unequivocal self-transformation upon whose constituency its character and continuation is utterly dependent. *The bonds of union thus created rest in the civic virtue of men become citizens.* In the act of association men negate their 'natural' selves by giving themselves wholly new natures of an artificial and social kind. *A citizen is a fresh kind of man* whose identity depends on the state. [Emphasis added.]⁷⁰

A citizen's attachment to the body politic is not through limited interests, but rather constitutes his very identity. Civic attachment and identity, which is quite different from self-interest, is the key to modern republican government.

Indeed, the central core of classical republicanism, which significantly influenced America's Founding, sees the possible absorption of the individual in private life as a danger to republican liberty

harmonization of interests and the responsible exercise of individual freedom. Stripped of these conditions, the individual is a bundle of desires and tastes, not a person capable of meaningful choice" (p. 190).

70. Maurice Keens-Soper, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract," in Forsyth and Keens-Soper, *Guide to Political Classics*, p. 179.

and the public spirit facilitated by citizen participation as the sole appropriate remedy. Thomas Paine was not alone in arguing that a republic can flourish only when most citizens are sufficiently virtuous and public-spirited to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the community. A nation of individuals who push only their rights and pursue only their selfish interests will be incapable of sharing a conception of the common good and therefore incapable of attaining civic virtue. Individuals are naturally sociable, bound together by mutual interest and reciprocal dependence. As Paine put it: "Common interest regulates their concerns and forms their laws; and the laws which common usage ordains, have a greater influence than the laws of government."⁷¹ These are the qualities of citizenship necessary for the progress of civilization. The public good cannot be based solely on the motive of self-interest. Higher motives are essential for the development and creation of a democratic republic.⁷²

Tocqueville found the heart of American democracy in active civic association. He observed that through active involvement in common concerns the citizen could overcome the sense of relative isolation and powerlessness resulting from the insecurity of life in a society undergoing the pangs of commercialization. Civic associations were the functional equivalent of the classical polity in which the social differentiation of individuals could be overcome by an investment in public life. Tocqueville feared that with growing social differentiation the individual would lose his sense of involvement and worth as well as his identity as a citizen. If democracy was to flourish, it would require a complex balance between the

71. Quoted in Mark Philp, *Paine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 69.

72. In various ways these themes were also pursued by the American antifederalists and federalists, despite their many other differences. Following the traditional principles of civic republicanism, the antifederalists believed that civil society should educate, not merely regulate, private conduct so as to move the citizenry away from the pursuit of self-interest, at least in politics. As Cass Sunstein explains, "The federalists' suspicion of civic virtue and their relative skeptical attitude towards the possibility that citizens could escape their self-interest led them to reject the traditional republican structure without rejecting important features of its normative understanding of politics." The Constitution they created and defended was a synthesis of traditional republicanism and emergent pluralism; created to "bring about public-spirited representation, to provide safeguards in its absence, and to ensure an important measure of popular control." See Cass R. Sunstein, "Interest Groups in American Public Law," *Stanford Law Review* 38 (November 1985): 29-87.

organizations of the state, the private citizen, and the associations that intermediate between citizen and state. The crucial part of this balance was the civic association which would transform the self-interest of the individual into the common good by making the individual an active politically aware subject rather than a passive object of state control.⁷³

John Stuart Mill also strongly believed that active citizenship was an essential condition for effective democracy. Mill defended representative government on the ground that it enabled the citizen to develop an active self-helping character through the educative function of participation. "The maximum of the invigorating effect of freedom upon the character is only obtained when the person is or can look forward to becoming a fully privileged citizen."⁷⁴ Part of the government's responsibility is to train individuals for full involvement in public life and to provide as many venues for their participation as is possible. It is through the moral instruction afforded from participation that the individual is transformed into a citizen.⁷⁵ For Mill, citizens are neither simply voters nor consumers. Contrary to the economic theory of democracy, citizenship is not equivalent to consumership.⁷⁶ The efficient maximization of individual happiness — the essential characteristic of early utilitarianism — means little without the benefits to civilization that are

73. This discussion of Tocqueville relies heavily on William M. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

74. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1962, originally published in 1861), p. 71.

75. Through participation, says Mill, the individual "is called upon, while so engaged to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good. . . . He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit." Quoted in Ball, "The Economic Reconstruction of Democratic Discourse," p. 134.

76. As Terence Ball observes: "The *beau ideal* of the economic theory is nothing less than Mill's passive character actively searching after his own 'material or world interest.' The language of moral development, of character, of education cannot even begin to be translated into the vocabulary of this theory. . . . That theory, or rather various versions of it, have as their ancestors the very perspective that Mill meant to criticize. If their characters are of the 'active' type, citizens are not just voters, and voters are not simply consumers; citizenship is not equivalent to consumership. Yet it is this doubtful equivalence that the economic theory of democracy insists upon asserting" (Ball, "The Economic Reconstruction of Democratic Discourse," p. 135).

brought about by the active participation of morally empowered citizens.

Since the 1950s democratic theory in American has been dominated by a rejection of classical democratic theories on the grounds that they "were normative and value-laden." As a consequence, they were replaced by a revisionism which aspired to develop scientific and empirical political theory, firmly grounded in the "facts" of political life.⁷⁷ Strongly influenced by the writings of Joseph Schumpeter,⁷⁸ a revision of democratic theory took place which viewed competitive elections as the main defining characteristic of modern democracy. Revisionist theories struggled to minimize the activities and responsibilities of citizens in order to reconcile normative theory with empirical political reality. Abandoning a commitment to classical ideas of democratic life, revisionists also surrendered to the impoverishment of contemporary political life. Rational choice theory, with its assumption of economic man and its minimal expectations for political participation, flourished as a product of democratic revisionism.

After a long period of dormancy, a new stream of creative thinking about "democratic engagement" has emerged to reinvigorate the democratic imagination.⁷⁹ Although viewing democracy

77. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 3.

78. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975, originally published in 1942).

79. A sample of these new works include: Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*; Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Duncan, "Human Nature and Radical Democratic Theory"; Philip Green, *Retrieving Democracy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanhead, 1985); David Harris, "Returning the Social to Democracy," in Duncan, *Democratic Theory and Practice*, pp. 218-34; essays by Allan Cochrane, Sheila Rowbotham, Iain McLean and John Burnheim in *New Forms of Democracy*, ed. David Held and Christopher Pollitt (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986); Jordon, *The Common Good*, Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Jane Mansbridge, "A Dynamic Theory of Interest Representation," in *The Politics of Interests: Interest Groups Transformed*, ed. Mark P. Petracca (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Marquand, "Preceptorial Politics"; David Miller, "The Competitive Model of Democracy," in Duncan, *Democratic Theory and Practice*, pp. 133-55; Philippe C. Schmitter, "Corporative Democracy" (Paper presented at the Conference on Politische Institutionen und Interessenvermittlung, Konstanz, Deutschland, 1988); Sullivan,

from very different vantage points, most of these theorists have a renewed commitment to commending the virtues of political participation and developing the opportunities for citizenship as the fundamental prerequisite for democratic governance. These theorists bring a new passion and vision for citizen engagement to the study of democratic theory even as expectations for such activity continue to plummet.

These new perspectives on democracy celebrate and require the development of citizenship as a prerequisite to effective democratic governance and self-rule. Robert Bellah advises that the "transformation of the state . . . should focus on bringing a sense of citizenship into the operation of government itself."⁸⁰ The communitarianism advocated by David Marquand is best facilitated by a form of "yeoman democracy" which follows the advice of John Stuart Mill to let citizens learn these values by "doing" politics. The new vision of democracy, says Philip Green requires heightened citizen activity through which the individual develops an appreciation for the public good transcending the individual's interests. Even Robert Dahl, a former revisionist, now focuses on the need to develop an active and informed citizenry through the elimination of fundamental economic inequalities, the widespread utilization of modern telecommunications technology, and the diffusion of democratic participation into the modern workplace.⁸¹

The new theories of democratic engagement view the economic model of democracy promoted by rational choice theory as a primary target for criticism. The work of Benjamin Barber, probably the most ambitious attempt thus far to defend participatory democracy against its many modern detractors and to set forth a reform agenda to achieve it, is a commanding rebuke of democracy founded upon the self-interest of *homo economicus*. The "democracy" that Barber envisions is not the constitutional liberalism of Riker, the minimal participatory practices of Schumpeter, or the political marketplace of Buchanan. Rather, it is a democracy in which "[t]he citizen is an adept participant in the polity, schooled in the arts of social interaction and marked by the capacity to distinguish the

Reconstructing Public Philosophy; and Roberto M. Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Roberto M. Unger, *False Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

80. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 211.

81. See Marquand, "Preceptoral Politics"; Green, *Retrieving Democracy*; Dahl, *Preface to Economic Democracy*; and Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*.

requirements of 'we' styles of thinking from those of 'me' styles of thinking."⁸²

What stands directly in the way of this possibility is the liberal individualism of contemporary political theory and practice, exemplified by the theories of rational choice.⁸³ The assumptions of rational choice theory make it exceedingly difficult to develop a citizenry which thinks as a "we" when its entire project of social science inquiry is predicated on the politics of "I."⁸⁴

While the new theories of democratic engagement do not share a common agenda for the design of political life, they nearly all share a common concern that the development of democratic citizens is made extremely problematic under the economic theory of democracy. Frequently cited in this emerging literature, C. B. MacPherson argued that participatory democracy requires "a downgrading or abandonment of market assumptions about the nature of man and society, a departure from the image of man as a maximizing consumer and a great reduction of the present economic and social inequality."⁸⁵ The assumptions of the liberal market metaphor are ironic and tragic for the prospects of active citizenship.

It is almost incredible until you come to think of it, that a society whose keyword is enterprise, which certainly sounds active, is in fact based on the assumption that human beings are so inert, so averse to activity, that is, to expenditure of energy, that every expenditure of energy is considered to be painful, to be, in the economists' term a disutility. This assumption, which is a travesty of the human condition, is built right into the justifying theory of the market society, and so of the liberal society.⁸⁶

82. Barber, *Conquest of Politics*, pp. 210–11.

83. Of course, it is easy to imagine how rational choice theorists might respond to Barber's indictment and vision. Consider the view of Steven Brams, *Rational Politics*: "In my opinion, it is better to have an understanding of what values are at stake, which rational-choice models can clarify, than to engage in a fruitless debate over the oft-touted virtues of democracy" (pp. 205–206). Barber's work is far more than a celebration of democracy's virtues, it is a plan for the development of strong democracy informed by a vision of a democratic polity. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of this prolific rational choice theorist.

84. Some liberal theorists also concede that liberal citizenship is not "simply the pursuit of self-interest, individually or in factional collusion with others of like mind." See William A. Galston, "Liberal Virtues," *American Political Science Review* 82 (December 1988): 1284.

85. As we see in the next section these inequalities are also helped along by the assumptions and logic of rational choice.

86. C. B. MacPherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 38.

This critique speaks directly to the cost-calculus of rational choice theory which justifies the absence of vibrant political participation.

The inability of the individual to make a commitment to anything beyond self-interest also weakens commitments to family and community and leads to the self-absorption, sometimes called narcissism.⁸⁷ Such an atomistic fate is inevitable as the theories of economic man beget both cognition and political practice. This needn't be the case, as John Plamenatz explains:

Man is not just an animal who, unlike the others, is provident and calculating. . . . He . . . wants to be one kind of person rather than another and to live one kind of life rather than another . . . How men see themselves . . . is intimately connected with their mental images of the community; they are not mere competitors, however benevolent, in a market for the supply of personal wants; they are members of society, and their hopes and feelings, both for themselves and others, would not be what they are apart from their group loyalties.⁸⁸

Kelman's finding that "the level of public spirit in the policymaking process is reasonably high" in America confirms this observation.⁸⁹ It is precisely this sense of interconnectedness which Pateman claims is necessary for effective participatory democracy and which is entirely absent from rational choice theory. However, the transformation of self-regarding individuals into public-spirited citizens is simply not present in the theories of rational choice. To the contrary, such a transformation, as Barber points out, "requires an understanding of citizenship more vigorous and mutualistic than the one favored by modern social scientists, which identified citizens as private agents pursuing private interests in a political marketplace."⁹⁰ Precisely how we might achieve this transformation is briefly considered in the conclusion.

The growth of economic ways of thinking and speaking are political dangers of the greatest significance. This warning has long been preserved and appreciated by the anti-modernist tradition in political philosophy, represented most notably by Leo Strauss and his students, who find the image of human nature posited by rational choice theory to be inimical to the good society. William

87. See Sullivan, *Reconstructing Political Philosophy*, p. 222.

88. Quoted in Barry, *Sociologists, Economists, and Democracy*, p. 176.

89. Kelman, "Why Public Ideas Matter," p. 31.

90. Barber, *Conquest of Politics*, p. 201.

Bluhm, for instance, maintains that "the world of preference summation . . . excludes things like good will, education to civic virtue, trust, responsible leadership, community and value consensus."⁹¹ The result is an intellectual cynicism and sterility which makes a mockery of the democratic promise and moral philosophy. With characteristic brevity, Joseph Cropsey summed up the problem for democracy posed by rational choice theory: "[T]he self-regarding man is, as such, the opposite of the citizen."⁹²

THE SECOND TRANSFORMATION: THE PUBLIC GOOD

What about the capacity of a political regime to achieve the public good? As we have seen, when it comes to the individual, the assumptions of rational choice are incompatible with the qualities necessary for the creation of democratic citizens.⁹³ Rational choice theory also has a major theoretical influence and a practical effect on the capacity of the political regime to realize the public good.

To begin, the very logic of the self-interested, utility maximizing, egoistic, individual creates a moral presumption in defense of how economic and political goods are distributed in the *status quo*. This justifies the individual's incentive and use of political force to preserve the *status quo*. As Peter Self explains: "A conservative position about collective action starts from the assumed interest of the individual over protecting his existing assets and freedom of action."⁹⁴ This human tendency is then invoked as the much revered "Pareto principle," a principle which makes a redistribution of economic goods as well as significant political change nearly impossible. There are few redistributive policies, for example, that can be justified as Pareto efficient. The set of assumptions which drive the theory of rational choice also creates a strong moral justification for the current distribution of economic and political resources.⁹⁵ Hence, not only can rational choice be easily used to

91. Bluhm, "Liberalism as the Aggregation of Individual Preferences," p. 289.

92. Joseph Cropsey, "On the Relation of Political Science and Economics," in *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 39.

93. I am persuaded by Slote, *Beyond Optimizing*; Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*; Bluhm, "Liberalism as the Aggregation of Individual Preferences"; and Steiner, "Rational Choice Theories and Politics," that there is not much of a moral difference between the assumptions of self-interest, maximization, or optimization; all of which create and encourage individuals who are self-regarding and insensitive to the interconnected nature of social existence.

94. Self, *Political Theories of Modern Government*, p. 70.

defend and conserve the economic and political *status quo*, but its assumptions about human nature direct it to do so.

Without a theory of how political preferences are formed and with a conception of the public good that justifies what the system produces rather than what it might or should produce, rational choice theory logically preserves and conserves a liberal, self-interested, individualistic *status quo* in which regime stability is valued over political change and the possibility of an emergent public good. Coupled with its narrow and self-regarding empirical conception of human nature, rational choice theory can be used to justify a political system fraught with political apathy and acquiescence along with great inequalities in the distribution of economic goods, political power and privilege.

Rational choice theorists do not have a theory of preference formation.⁹⁶ They "do not," observes Plamenatz "enquire how men acquire their aims or goals, and how their accepting some values rather than others, or having some institutions rather than others, effects their aims. . . . Indeed, they are not even much interested in the nature of the aims or goals whose achievement political action is to maximize; they have little enough to say about them."⁹⁷ Instead of considering the processes by which aims, goals, and preferences are created and developed as well as their innate qualities, rational choice theories "accept as given people's desires, rather than to assess their intrinsic merit."⁹⁸

Taking a preference for the maximization of self-interest or even utility as a given begets both a cognitive and a political reality in which individuals and political leaders alike come to view such behavior as normatively acceptable and as the standard by which government should operate. It also suggests a standard for the evaluation of governmental activity. This not only justifies a particularly Hobbesian view of humanity but prevents the regime from moving away from public policies reflecting the struggle of selfish

95. This often leads some rational choice theorists to a myopic defense of property rights. Buchanan, for example, gives the "status quo a privileged status, since he maintains that nobody can rightfully be deprived (even by legislation) of what he now has" (see Barry, *Theories of Justice*, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], p. 174).

96. This is a problem which is just beginning to receive attention from friendly critics like Simon and practitioners such as Hector. See Simon, "Human Nature in Politics," and Hector, *Principles of Group Solidarity*.

97. Plamenatz, *Democracy and Illusion*, p. 150.

98. Ricci, *Tragedy of Political Science*, p. 241.

interests. The theory of pluralism and its public policy cousin incrementalism are grounded in this limited notion of human nature and regime self-justification. Despite fervent critiques over the past quarter of a century, pluralism and incrementalism still dominate the way Americans think about politics and continues to exercise a strong influence on how the political system operates.

Rational choice preserves the *status quo* because it can offer no sense of a good or desirable society beyond procedural principles for articulating and aggregating individual preferences.⁹⁹ In rational choice theory, the assumption that the public good can be equated with the aggregation of individual preferences or utilities, ends up as a normatively justified political principle. Riker's recent analysis of liberalism versus populism is one of the most disappointing examples of this tendency.¹⁰⁰ After an analysis of the inability of populism to produce a "meaningful social choice," Riker offers this sobering assessment of the public interest:

It forces us to doubt that the content of "social welfare" or the "public interest" can ever be discovered by amalgamating individual value judgments. It even leads us to suspect that no such thing as the "public interest" exists, aside from the subjective (and hence dubious) claims of self-proclaimed saviors.¹⁰¹

Riker uses the results of his analysis to reach the "conservative normative conclusion"¹⁰² that democracy cannot possibly live up to many of the claims made for it, and that only "liberalism" (which includes a variety of constitutional restraints) is supportable.

America's liberal democracy, the system of governance Riker believes we have, is threatened, he says, by populists who "persistently seek to undermine" its fundamental constitutional limitations. "Populism puts democracy at risk," and the only way to preserve the liberty that democracy makes possible is to "preserve ardently our traditional constitutional restraints—decentralized

99. See Self, *Political Theories of Modern Government*, p. 178; and Ricci, *Tragedy of Political Science*, p. 243.

100. See William H. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1982).

101. *Ibid.*, p. 137. Saviors of the public interest around the world—past and present—can take great comfort in Riker's authoritative and scientifically derived conclusion.

102. See Iain McLean, *Public Choice: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 186.

parties and multicameral government."¹⁰³ "The total effect" of liberalism coupled with constitutional restraints, according to Riker "is that policy does not change either rapidly or sharply enough to hurt anyone very badly." Riker's justification of incrementalism as a natural and beneficial product of liberalism reveals the tendency of rational choice theorists to preserve existent political arrangements and their distributional consequences.¹⁰⁴

Unlike Riker, Buchanan does believe that there is a common good. However, it is a common good produced by the clash of self-interested individuals in the "political market." "The challenge to us," says Buchanan, "is one of constructing, or reconstructing, a political order that will channel the self-serving behavior of participants towards the common good in a manner that comes as close as possible to that described for us by Adam Smith with respect to the economic order."¹⁰⁵ Thus, public policy *as is* becomes the public interest as it *ought to be*.¹⁰⁶ This is consistent with Tullock's view of what we might call the "minimalist state": "[T]he state (like the market) has no goal 'higher' than the carrying out of the desires of the people who compose it."¹⁰⁷ The Buchanan-Tullock view of the public interest and the role of the state not only legitimizes current political outcomes as the public interest, but also justifies America's current institutional arrangements for constitutional democracy¹⁰⁸ and provides a strong imperative for the privatization of public policy.

103. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, p. 252. For a lively critique of Riker's comparison, see A. Weale, "Social Choice Versus Populism: An Interpretation of Riker's Political Theory," *British Journal of Political Science* 14 (1982): 369-85.

104. As an individual committed to scientific inquiry, Riker's catty and openly evocative discussion of C. B. McPherson, Karl Marx and Marcus Raskin is rather unbecoming. See Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, pp. 12-16.

105. James M. Buchanan, "From Private Preferences to Public Philosophy: The Development of Public Choice," in *The Economics of Politics*, ed. Institute of Economic Affairs (West Sussex: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1978), p. 17. This is also similar to Robert Dahl's notion of "Madisonian democracy." See Dahl, *Preface to Democratic Theory*. For different positions on Madison, see Diamond, "Ethics and Politics"; and Sunstein, "Interest Groups in American Public Law."

106. See Ricci, *Tragedy of Political Science*, p. 242.

107. Gordon Tullock, *Private Wants, Public Needs* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 32-33.

108. Buchanan and Tullock (*Calculus of Consent*, pp. 300-301) believe that one of the more significant doctrinal implications of their theory "lies in its implicit rationalization of a political structure that has never seemed to possess rigorous theoretical foundation." As is the case for Riker, this political structure is the American experiment in constitutional democracy.

The consequences of such a philosophy could be devastating. "A privatization philosophy is liable to produce a more unequal, divided, and perhaps violent society," says Self.¹⁰⁹ But, of course, it is precisely a privatization philosophy which the so-called Virginia school of public choice is widely known to advocate.¹¹⁰

Thus, there are three reasons for the conclusion that rational choice theory is driven to conserve and preserve the present political system along with its many distributional implications. By assuming that human nature is motivated by a quest for the maximization of self-interest rational choice theories must necessarily credit and respect political outcomes in which individuals act to protect their interests—to preserve an advantage or to ameliorate a disadvantage. Absent a theory of preference formation this behavior becomes an acceptable norm, perhaps to be channeled, but always encouraged. Likewise, the rational choice conception of the common good does little more than justify the outcomes of the current political system on the grounds that this system is preferred to alternative systems.¹¹¹

As a path to democratic citizenship and the public good the rational choice paradigm is fraught with problems. We are then left to speculate how such transformation might best take place. It is to a consideration of this question that we finally turn.

109. Self, *Political Theories of Modern Government*, p. 74.

110. See Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington: Twenty-five Years of Public Choice and Political Science."

111. Since threats do exist to the stability of the American regime—from the populists according to Riker and from the Leviathan-state according to Buchanan—rational choice theory has also been invoked to support the political agenda of neoconservatism. While I agree that it would be a mistake to identify rational choice analysis with some version of the New Right, there is a strong and disturbing tendency by rational choice theorists to deploy their "scientific" prowess on behalf of the New Right's political agenda. Examples to illustrate this point are abundant: Riker's support of fiscal reform at the constitutional level, Buchanan and Wagner's attack on deficit spending, Buchanan's defense of property rights; Olson's call for open and competitive markets; and the "Virginians" principled rejection of governmental intervention in matters of regulation and social policy. See William H. Riker, "Constitutional limitations as a self-denying ordinances," in *The Constitution and the Budget, 85-90*, ed. W. S. Moore and R. G. Penner (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980); James M. Buchanan and Richard E. Wagner, *Democracy in Deficit* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); James M. Buchanan, *Freedom in Constitutional Contract* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M Press, 1977); Olson, *Rise and Decline of Nations*; and Mitchell, "Virginia, Rochester, and Bloomington: Twenty-five Years of Public Choice and Political Science."

CONCLUSION: THE REDISCOVERY OF DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

Influential rational choice models of politics and policy making are unable to meet the challenges of normative democratic theory. The rational choice approach negates the importance and debilitates the process of transforming self-interested individuals into public-spirited citizens and defends a conception of the public good which does little more than preserve a *status quo* characterized by great inequalities in political opportunities, political power, and economic well-being. The "new orthodoxy" of rational choice leads Bill Jordon to surmise that "In trying to construct a theory of the good society out of individual self-interest and individual moral responsibility, the new orthodoxy constructs no society at all."¹¹² The paradoxical vision and effects of rational choice are also keenly observed by Jane J. Mansbridge: "It is hard for a polity simultaneously to legitimate self-interest and to persuade its citizens to make the common good their own. The task becomes harder when political scientists, economists, and psychologists insist that common interests are a myth and that appeals to such interests are either mystification or a waste of effort."¹¹³

What then is to be done to remedy the limitation imposed by the rational choice approach on the attainment of the previously discussed goals of normative democratic theory? What promising alternatives are available to the rational choice models of politics and policy making?

As the paradigmatic hegemony of rational choice is increasingly called into question by "old-fashioned students of politics" and new empirical research, the new architects of democratic engagement must devote their philosophical attention to the processes most suitable to the transformative processes required for citizenship and attainment of the public good. The alternative most directly attentive to these specific concerns is democratic deliberation.

The prevailing view of politics and policymaking promoted by rational choice theory "disregards the importance of democratic deliberation for refining and altering" individual self-interests¹¹⁴ and "for the discovery and creation of the public good."¹¹⁵ Democratic deliberation—in both its representative and direct citizen

112. Jordon, *Common Good*, p. 16.

113. Jane J. Mansbridge, "Preface," in Mansbridge, *Beyond Self-Interest*, p. x.

114. Reich, "Introduction," in Reich, *Power of Public Ideas*, p. 3.

115. Mansbridge, "Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life," p. 9.

variants—emphasizes what is good for society, education in citizenship, and social understanding. Above all, it emphasizes the necessity of transforming individual preferences as the means to obtaining the public good. In contrast to competitive models of deliberation which involve the clash of fixed preferences,¹¹⁶ democratic deliberation involves changing and shaping preferences among political elites, elected representatives, and ordinary citizens.¹¹⁷

Contemporary scholarship about democratic deliberation by Robert Reich, Jane Mansbridge, Cass Sunstein, and Joseph Bessette combines the rediscovered tradition of republican civic virtue with the political realism of Madisonian (not pluralistic) republicanism.¹¹⁸ The tradition of republican civic virtue maintains that “through discussion, people can, in their capacities as citizens, escape private interests and engage in pursuit of the public good.” While skeptical of such claims, Madison and other federalists did not reject the important normative features of the traditional republican structure. Instead, the federalists fashioned a system of deliberation in which representatives would be held accountable to the public and where the “separation of powers would ensure that if a particular group acquired too much power over one set of representatives, there would be safeguards to prevent that group from obtaining authority over the national government in general.”¹¹⁹ However, for the reasons previously discussed, political life in America is more frequently cast in terms antithetical to the transformative capacity envisioned by democratic deliberation.

The politics of democratic deliberation, as opposed to the rational choice politics of self-interest, will lessen the likelihood of individual or governmental action taken solely for private-regarding reasons and may strikingly increase the possibility that “citizens

116. For example, see Dahl, *Preface to Democratic Theory*.

117. See Mansbridge, “A Dynamic Theory of Interest Representation.”

118. See Reich, *Power of Public Ideas*; Mansbridge, “Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life”; Mansbridge, “A Dynamic Theory of Interest Representation”; Sunstein, “Interest Groups in American Public Law”; Joseph M. Bessette, “Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government,” in *How Democratic Is the Constitution?* eds., Robert A. Goldwin and William A. Schambra (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), pp. 102–116; and Joseph M. Bessette, “Is Congress a Deliberative Body?” in *The United States Congress: Proceedings of the Thomas P. O’Neill Symposium*, ed. Dennis Hale (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College, 1982).

119. Sunstein, “Interest Groups in American Public Law,” pp. 46–47.

and legislators will act for public-regarding reasons."¹²⁰ Of course, there are no guarantees. Self-interest is here to stay, though we need not surrender to the uninspired and anomic political life that it may foster. We live in a polity where many of the influential theories and techniques of social science analysis along with political institutions are based upon the self-interested, maximizing behavior of individuals. The time to "redress this imbalance" has come; first, through the revitalization of a political theory compatible with the transformative requirements of normative democratic theory and second, through the creation of "institutions that foster a commitment to the common good."¹²¹ Democratic deliberation is one model worth pursuing to meet the challenges of democratic rectification.

120. Sunstein, "Interest Groups in American Public Law," pp. 84-85.

121. Mansbridge, "Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life," p. xii.